

#164 CHARLES SIMPSON: TARGET REPAIRMAN AT BISHOP'S POINT

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay. Let me slate this, I'll say the following interview with Charles Simpson was conducted on December 3, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki at about two-thirty in the afternoon. Mr. Simpson lives in Vallejo, California.

Charles Simpson (CS): Right.

BF: And the interview is being conducted by Bart Fredo and also in the room is Dan Martinez of the National Park Service.

Mr. Simpson, let me ask you to tell us your name and your hometown back in 1941.

CS: My name is Charles W. Simpson. I enlisted in the Navy and ran from Ramsey, New Jersey, my hometown, in 1938.

BF: What was your rank and your job in 1941?

CS: I was a Seaman First [Class].

BF: Any specific job classification?

CS: Target repair work.

BF: Tire repair?

CS: Target repair work.

BF: What were you doing early in the morning, December 7?

CS: I had just -- we had brunch that morning, Sunday morning, and I had just finished breakfast.

BF: Where was that?

CS: In the barracks. We, our mess hall is attached to our barracks at (hesitates, snaps fingers) . . .

BF: I can't help you. (Chuckles)

CS: . . . [Bishop] Point. And I just finished breakfast and lay down on my bunk with my clothes on.

BF: Let's, let's -- let me stop you there. Now, tell us about where is [Bishop] Point?

CS: [Bishop Point] at the entrance to Pearl Harbor. It's on the Hickam Field side of the channel. And our barracks is right behind the huge hangars at Hickam Field. They were across the street from where our barracks was.

BF: So you had breakfast early that morning?

CS: Yes. And just settled down for a little catnap.

BF: What happened?

CS: We heard -- I heard an explosion and couple of my other shipmates, we heard an explosion, sounded like Ford Island. Well, we've heard explosions there before, not as loud as that and then they stopped, there was more, you know, started to -- we could hear more and louder. And they started getting louder. We ran out of the barracks and we ended up between the barracks and the warehouse where I worked and we looked around, we saw smoke, black smoke rising up. And one of the fellows said, "Maybe they're having a sham battle. Maybe the Army and Navy are having a sham battle," 'cause we didn't see any planes right off the bat.

But it wasn't shortly after that, a low-flying plane came over. And we looked up to it and a couple of us started to wave at it. And we saw the red suns on the end of the wings. And we said, "Those aren't friendly!" We took off for the barracks.

And we went into -- and we ran into the barracks to go into the armory and the officer of the deck was excited and everything because the explosions were getting louder and then vibrating our barracks. And so one of the fellows kicked the door in on the armory, and then we grabbed rifles and everything. And I got a hold of a rifle with a bolt when it was open and looked for ammo. I didn't see any ammo, so we ran down to the waterfront. And . . .

BF: With no ammunition?

CS: I didn't have some. Some of the other fellows had. And I checked the bolt on my 30R6 and it didn't fit, it didn't work. Darn thing didn't work.

BF: So you couldn't have used it if you had to?

CS: I couldn't have used it. No. But I went down there because I thought everyone else was going down there. So we're down there -- and that's when I saw the -- shortly after that I saw the one destroyer coming out the base, firing its guns.

BF: What was it firing at?

CS: Anti-aircraft.

BF: You could see the planes in the sky?

CS: I didn't see so many planes.

BF: Could you see any?

CS: Yeah, I saw one shot down.

BF: You did? Tell us about that.

CS: I saw one jet plane down with half a wing missing, one of its -- half the wing was missing and it was going like this, coming down to the . . .

BF: Swirling down?

CS: Swirling down to the water, right.

BF: And it crashed in the water?

CS: It crashed into the water.

BF: Did you see the pilot at all? Did he bail out?

CS: No, he was too far away from us. We were like -- we weren't that close to him.

BF: Did you see any planes do any attacking at all?

CS: Oh, yes. After, shortly after that, the planes came in, were coming into bombing the Hickam Field barracks. Well, we heard it was loud and clear. And then some of our shipmates were coming down to the waterfront and was giving us, telling us what they saw. Like some guy said, "They're painting white lines on the street. Somebody is marking the water line or something on the street for the Japs to bomb!" And just guys talking, I guess.

And I still couldn't get my gun to work so I crept back up through the, under the target. We had the targets on the land and we had 'em up on blocks.

BF: These were floating targets that you now had on land?

CS: Yeah, high speed targets, tow targets. And I crept back up to go back to the armory to see if I could get a better bolt and get some ammo for my rifle. And when I got up to there and went in and I couldn't find another bolt, but I found some ammo. And so I went -- and those cloth things that you put 'em around your shoulder and carry it and so I wrapped it around and said, "Well, I can't fire, I'll at least have some ammo on me."

So I went back out of the barracks then and just about that time, the commanding officer of the base came aboard with some of his family. And he had on a white uniform top, but he had civilian pants on. And he was --- him and then --- they got underneath the sled right in the front of the barracks and just about that time, a big hunk of something came down and hit the ground, right by the barracks and it made a hole in the barracks. And the commanding officer got a hold of a stick and he ran over and I thought it was very foolish. He ran over, stuck the stick in a hole. He said, "I don't want nobody around," (chuckles). What if that thing blew up? (Laughing)

BF: What was it?

CS: Piece of shrapnel.

BF: From what?

CS: We don't know. It was from the . . . I guess it came from the hangars, when they were bombing the hangars, which were across the street from us.

BF: Did any of the strafing or any of the bombs fall anywhere near you?

CS: No. That's the . . . we had -- nobody, they didn't bomb us at all, didn't strafe us with machine gun fire or nothing.

BF: How long was it before you had an opportunity to go further into the harbor and see the destruction?

CS: I didn't go into the harbor. What happened, we stayed all night down there at the base . . .

BF: At Bishop Point.

CS: . . . at the waterfront. We were told that we were landing troops. We would stay on the water, on the sea wall there. And the next morning, we were given orders to take our target rafts and they were going to put 'em around the sunken ships down there. And we were -- they were welding strips of steel to hang down the sides so, you know, because they thought there were two-man submarines in the harbor. And I was helping 'em do the welding and all that and I didn't have any protective glasses on and I got my eyes burnt. And that was the end of that tour. I didn't get to go down with the rafts or anything.

BF: Were you permanently injured?

CS: Well, my eye, I couldn't see for a while, but I got my sight back. So I get -- they gave me different kind of duty. They gave me -- the funniest thing -- they gave me chauffeur's duty.

BF: What's that?

CS: Driving a bus. Oh, the ROSE-CRANT bus that they used to have here, years ago.

BF: When did you get an opportunity to see the destruction in the harbor?

CS: When I got my job for chauffeuring down to the navy yard.

BF: How many days after the attack?

CS: Oh, about two days. Day after, day or two after it.

BF: What was your reaction when you saw the destruction?

CS: Oh, I was astonished. What I seen and what I heard were stories that were flying all over. I heard about the OGLALA and how it -- somebody said it was hit by fifty-caliber's and rolled over and the guys walked right onto the ten-ten here. Stuff like that was being told.

BF: You eventually saw Battleship Row on Ford Island?

CS: Oh yes, how bad it was. Well, we knew about that because . . .

BF: You had heard?

CS: Yes, oh yes.

BF: But when you first saw it, what was your reaction?

CS: Well, pretty peed off.

BF: You were mad?

CS: Oh yes, yes. I was mad, yeah. Well, we all were mad. Very mad about it.

BF: Were you surprised at the extent of the destruction? You had heard stories, of course, but did you know it was that bad? Had you been prepared?

CS: Well, I didn't see -- we hardly see any ships come out, so we knew it had to be that bad. And the stories we heard, the oil was catching fire and the ships, the oil from the ships and everything and pretty good deal about the dry dock blew up. We knew about that. That was brought up. They said, "What a big explosion that was." I mean, a floating dry dock blew up.

BF: Because of where you were, you didn't see anybody get hit or any . . .

CS: No.

BF: . . . of the ships . . .

CS: No.

BF: . . . being attacked.

CS: That's true.

BF: Because you were out towards the entrance of the harbor.

CS: Right and there was buildings and a lot of stuff in front of us, right.

BF: What is your most vivid memory of that day?

CS: Well . . .

BF: What's the first thing you think of when someone says, "Pearl Harbor?"

CS: Well, the first thing I think of, I was there but yet I didn't get to do very much of anything. Of course I didn't actually get any tools for war. I wasn't prepared for it! (Chuckles)

BF: They also serve, we stand and wait.

(Conversation off-mike.)

BF: Yes. We'll continue the interview . . .

CS: Okay. Right.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

VIDEOTAPE TWO

Daniel Martinez: I'd like to find out how target repair is, what the targets were used for.

BF: All right, okay. I'll ask it, okay. What were those targets used for, that you worked on?

CS: The targets were used generally. We had high-speed targets that the old four-pipers used to tow out and then the destroyer divisions would fire in competition. They had competition on firing on the screens, on the targets. And the gun officers on the ships, they get pretty close to scraps sometimes when they brought the targets in because the projectiles that they fired at the targets when they hit the screen had paint on it. And it had different colors, so different ships, they knew what ships hit the target. And we used to spread the screen out on the ground and they checked the holes and all that. And that was one deal we had out there.

Another deal we had was we had long-range targets. They were --- some of 'em had cement bottoms to 'em. They drew about as much water as a battleship. Yeah. But we put 'em out and anchor 'em. And the big ships would fire at 'em, the heavy cruisers and the battle wagons would shoot at those.

BF: How long were you in Hawaii after the attack before you left?

CS: In 1942, I left the islands in 1942.

BF: When in '42, do you remember?

CS: No. I went back to new construction of submarines when I left Honolulu.

BF: While you were here, after the attack, as you know, martial law was in effect then.

CS: That's right.

BF: How did that affect your life?

CS: Very much.

BF: Tell us about it.

CS: Well, we were land-based sailors, so when the ships were out, we were liberty-bound. The town was ours. But when the ships were in, like December 7, we stayed aboard. And December the seventh, the lights went out, that ended our overnight liberties and, well, it was tough. It was a different world to me altogether because it was, well, the sun went down, head for the barracks. (Chuckles)

BF: In the weeks, in the months after the attack, did you have an opportunity to go ashore . . .

CS: Oh yes, yes.

BF: . . . on liberty?

CS: Oh yeah. During the day hours only.

BF: Tell us about that.

CS: Well. . .

BF: What did you do? What did you do? Where would you go?

CS: Well, I don't know if you want to hear where some of the places I've been to.

BF: Sure.

CS: You do? Well, we'd go over -- well, I used to -- a couple of us guys would go down and we checked the houses down on [River] Street, because the girls, the new girls from the States would be coming in and we checked them to see if the new girls were there. We used to go there when the ships were out because there wasn't too much traffic going on there. And we sit down, we talked to 'em, we asked them questions. We wanted to know how they get in this business and, you know, a little inquisitive. And the price was right too. (Laughs)

BF: What else did you do besides that?

CS: Well, I used to just come out here to Waikiki, go swimming sometimes and have a few brews and, oh, I had a car. I bought a car off a sailor who was being transferred back to the States. It was an old Model T. And I picked up a Hawaiian girl, the first Hawaiian girl I picked up since I was out here. And you had to have a car to do it in them days. And I don't . . . well. I didn't . . . well, knew her for a while but then our friendship fell away.

BF: Because of martial law you'd have to . . .

CS: I'd go back . . .

BF: . . . be back on base . . .

CS: . . . at night.

BF: . . . at night.

CS: Yes. Yes.

BF: So that sort of . . .

CS: That put a pinch to that. Yes. Yeah.

BF: Do you know how the martial law affected the civilians? You knew this one Hawaiian girl, did she talk about how it affected her?

CS: No. No, she never. No.

BF: Did you have much contact with civilians at all during your . . .

CS: No, no, I didn't. No, the funniest thing was, like I was telling you, they made me a chauffeur, because when I burnt my eyes on the welding, and I

couldn't see at night. And I had to pick the officers up after the movies, out at . . . and drive them to their quarters. And then we had the little squares in our headlights and I couldn't see and I was running off the road.

BF: Did it strike you as a little strange that they assigned you to be a driver when you couldn't see that well?

CS: Well, they didn't know that and I didn't 'til I found out myself. (Laughing) And scared the heck out of myself. So one of the officers took over and he drove. He said, "Where did we get this driver?" (Laughing)

BF: What -- just very briefly, we don't want to spend a lot of time on this -- briefly, what did you do for the rest of the war?

CS: Oh, the rest of the war, I came back to the States with new construction for submarines. And Treasure Island, they changed my orders to amphibious, because amphibious was brand new. So I went back east and caught a . . . no, it was an old ship. Anyway, we went to Sicily. I made the Sicily invasion, I was in on that. And then we came back and made the Okinawa and Marshall Island invasion.

BF: So you were on, like, an LSD or an LST, or something like that.

CS: No, it wasn't, no, it was an APA, amphibious personnel.

BF: You made it through the war okay, no scratches?

CS: No, I didn't. Nothing, not even high blood pressure. I didn't get that until after I retired from the Navy. I stayed in for twenty, twenty-two and a half years.

BF: Some people who went through the attack on Pearl Harbor have some bad feelings about Japan, about the Japanese, and they hold them to this day. How do you feel?

CS: I don't feel anything. No, I don't feel that way. It was a deal that happened and they paid the price. I went ashore in Tokyo after the war and it was all over with. Oh, by the way, I remember, we had, what do you call, hunting license that some guy printed up right out here somewhere. Maybe it was down in downtown by the YMCA, and I bought one of them and signed it, used to carry it. You know, it was just a piece of paper. I still have it in my scrapbook.

BF: What did it say?

CS: A hunting license, Japanese hunting license.

BF: So there was obviously a lot of anti-Japanese . . .

CS: Oh yes.

BF: . . . feeling then.

CS: Oh, very much so. Oh yes. Yes.

BF: But over the years, as far as you're concerned . . .

CS: Well, I was in that last invasion we made, right before President Roosevelt died and then they dropped the big bombs, and that's the last of that war. And then, later on, I was in the Korean War and I didn't see much of anything.

BF: Do you think much about Pearl Harbor? Have you over the last . . .

CS: Oh, I enjoy coming over here and it does bring back memories. And I'm trying to find old buddies, old shipmates of mine, and they're hard to pick out. This fellow, Hardwick, we just got in touch with him. There's another fellow that lives in, outside of Palm Springs, he lives out in the desert there. And we're trying to talk him into joining our outfit and come out here.

BF: As devastating as the attack on Pearl Harbor was, for you, it wasn't that harrowing an experience because of where you were.

CS: I was on a base, yes. I realize that. I didn't go through ship sinking underneath me or anything like that. I went through the whole war with no ship sinking under my feet. I was very . . . I was -- we used to make smoke when the Jap suicide planes came in on some of our --- landing we made on the islands and we used to make smoke. And no plane ever came headed for a ship that I was on. I said someone up there is taking care of me, afterwards.

BF: Stop it for a minute, I'll talk to Dan. You had . . .

--: (Conversation off-mike)

BF: How would you feel about, if at one of these reunions you had an opportunity to meet Japanese survivors of the attack?

CS: I think that's a good idea. I saw some of that in Germany, on TV I seen it, where our soldiers have met German soldiers over there and I thought that was a good idea. Because, what the heck, that's water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned. And they were fighting, they weren't doing it on their own, they were told to do it. You know, that's a good idea. I like that.

BF: Would you . . . what would you say? What would be one of the first things you'd say?

CS: Well, if I finally meet the pilot . . .

BF: Japanese pilot.

CS: Yeah, pilot off one of those flat tops, I'd ask him where he strafed the bombs. Did he bomb out at Hickam Field? There's one, that first plane that flew over the top of us, we, a couple guys, we had to wave, and he played his gun, his, "dit-dit-dit," out of his guns.

BF: Not at you?

CS: No, he was flying across us.

BF: And sort of . . .

CS: And he looked down, seen us down there.

BF: And he acknowledged the waving by firing his guns?

CS: I guess he did. I guess he did, yeah. He fired it, "dit-dit," give 'em, you know, just a short blast. (Laughs) We took off. He might come back. (Laughing) That's why we . . .

END OF INTERVIEW